Globalization, urban governance and the concept of community

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FIRST DRAFT

Abstract

The process of globalization in urban contexts produces a raise in the demand of public treatment of problems that is paralleled by a decreasing capacity of direct local government intervention due to fiscal difficulties.
Changes can be described in terms of :
-    the raise of a new subject of urban policies, the European Union;
-    the acceleration of the pace of change of urban economic base;
-    the explosion of information and the growing difficulty in having a comprehensive view of city trends, the spread of NIMBY syndrome;
-    the growing phenomena of social polarisation;
-    the crisis of traditional social links: neighborhood, group ecc.

The new demands open towards a variety of new local policies:
-    to intercept UE fundings;
-    to sustain economic local development and competitiveness;
-    to improve the quality of the environment and the quality of the public space;
-    to treat problems of social exclusion;
-    to deal with the problem of urban security;

The paper holds that resources to deal with these new demands of public intervention are not available in the traditional approaches of a State that provides solutions to well defined problems and that on the contrary they are available in the civil society but their use implies a new concept of public treatment of problems and demands.
In this perspective the notion of community is recurrent:
-    community development
-    policy community
-    local coalitions as artificial communities to sustain economic development
-    community planning
The paper discusses some general feature of this, trying to clarify the nexus between urban governance and the creation of intentional "communities".

In the last decade there is a return of attention to the concept of community. The way in which it is used is very different, but this return is in some way connected with deep movements that have interested the society of western countries and that are usually described as the effects of the globalisation process. Of that process that that has simultaneously seen, as a consequence of the development of information systems, a reduction of distances, an unprecedented increase of virtual and physical mobility of goods and people, a more and more open concurrence among markets once relatively closed, in such a way that national boundaries are less and less important.

In this paper I would like to analyse some of the effects of globalisation in terms of new social and territorial phenomena that produce a new demand for public policies (§ 1), then I will try to illustrate which are the perspectives for urban governance that are opened by these new demands (§ 2), and finally I will conclude upon the notion of community as a key concept (§ 3).

1. Globalisation, local effects and demand of new policies

A first effect of the globalisation processes is the concentration of economic growth in areas that have good access to the communication networks, typically the great cities (Sassen 1994), but also the dynamic "industrial districts" that are able to keep the pace of innovation necessary to survive in a more open competition (Rullani 1997). In any case the territorial contexts that participate of the economic prosperity distributed in unequal way by global economy, are the more articulated ones, those that succeed to maintain a high level of complexity through spontaneous adaptations or public policies.

A second effect is the explosion of information, that in its strong linkage with social fragmentation, on the one hand makes more and more difficult the institution of monopolistic positions for an overall representation of public problems to be addressed (as it had been in the past through planning instruments), and on the other hand makes it difficult to ignore citizen demands, for a better quality of life or against projects that are seen as a threat against the existing condition. The Nimby syndrome tends to flourish everywhere, and it is strictly connected to the change in urban development model toward decentralisation and diffusion of growth.
The difficulty of giving a picture of an ever changing urban society and the fragmentation of citizen demands are, as it is all too evident, well connected.

A third effect is the social polarisation process that is due to the selective mechanisms of global economy. The phenomena of social disorganisation, that come out from the uneven economic growth, discriminate among individuals and groups that for territorial, cultural or social reasons can participate to the increasing economic wealth and those that can not. The discrimination is either among diverse localities and within the same ones.
In Italy there is on the one hand the never solved problem of a southern part of the country that has persistent difficulties in keeping the pace of development, and on the other the problem of immigration from third world countries that creates within the richest northern cities an increasing number of poors. But problems of social exclusion

also involve manual or intellectual workers with traditional skills, if they loose their job or elderly people.

A fourth effect that furthermore aggravates the conditions of who is affected by exclusion phenomena, is the breach of the ties of traditional solidarity: family, neighbourhood, political party, class or ethnic group. Competition and the necessity of belonging to non territorial networks of professional, economic and informative nature, imply the weakening of traditional ones. This progressively eliminates a form of extended social integration that until the recent past was not only a good thing for urban life and attractivity, but also a substitution of a generalised public intervention. The weakening of familiar ties opens problems for elderly and child care, the disappearance of neighbourhood or party activity opens problems of safety in streets and so on.

Finally it could be considered as an effect of the processes of globalisation the appearance of a new political actor of central level, the European Union that, overlapping the hierarchy of the existing powers, promotes new local initiatives and makes available new significant resources for urban policies that can attract the interest and action of local institutions.

It seems important to emphasise that independently from the positive or negative character that these effects introduce, they pose new demands to public policies, inserting in the local agenda new problems for the treatment of which the society is called to assign increasing resources. We can quickly scan these new demands looking to them already in terms of new policies.

- Policies for the growth of infrastructures of communication and transport, the realisation and expansion of physical and virtual networks that could guarantee external and internal accessibility of the various areas.

- Policies to promote local economic development, in competition with all the other areas in the global economy. This gives to local authorities a direct responsibility in maintaining flexible and diversified the local economy.

- Policies of territorial and urban marketing to attract external new investments in the area.

- Policies to support the continuous reconversion of the productive base and of the connected physical structures: industrial abandoned areas, railway areas, but also schools, hospitals, office buildings…

- Policies directed to favour the continuous training of labour force in order to adapt the supply to an ever changing demand of professional qualifications.

- Policies to deal with environmental problems and in general for the improvement of the "minimal" quality of cities and regions: quality of air, water, soil, but also streets, public spaces, green, parking facilities, pedestrian areas and paths. This demand of new quality is seen not only as a way to respond to inhabitants that become more sensitive, because more informed, but also as an answer to a new

demand of quality that is advanced by enterprises; an important condition to chose a locality as the destination of economic investments. In this way the support to local economic competitiveness is not only a matter of economic policies but it involves a much more complex set of actions and policies.

- Policies for dealing with the problems induced by the phenomena of social exclusion: not only the availability of services, but above all the accessibility of them, for overcoming cultural and economic and social barriers. In Italy we experience a relevant problem concerning housing policies for immigrants that tend to be excluded by ordinary social housing; but the same problem arises for health services or for child-care.

- Policies for urban security and safety that are a direct outcome of the dissolution of the traditional ties of social solidarity and constitute more and   more important topics in the agenda of local policies.

- Policies to capture funding coming from the European Union or those that are activated from the national and regional governments following the competitive approach introduced by UE. These programs force the local administrations toward a new style that is characterised by a positive attitude for cooperation with public and private parties, the efficiency in the expenditure, a procedure of ongoing evaluation that is for the Italian administration really new and requires a great effort.

2. From government to governance

It is all too evident that the phenomena connected in some way to the globalisation processes propose new demands for policies that place besides and does not replace the traditional demands. This happens in a situation in which economic resources for growth of public intervention are more and more limited.
In this context, the only way to cope with the increasing demands is that of a change in the way in which public problems are dealt with and the governing activity is developed. It is simply not possible, for reasons of economic and institutional capacity, to think to an extension of local government direct intervention in order to answer effectively to all the old and new demands that are addressed to it. On the one hand the financial policies connected to the processes of European integration produce a restriction of the available resources and on the other hand the great public institutions of local government at the city-regional scale, are not able to adapt and to answer to the articulation and multiplication of demands for the dynamic conservatism (Schön 1971) of the bureaucracies. This gives place to a situation in which the public actor, in new fields of activities, can more often produce obstacles rather than solutions.

Redefining the forms of public intervention implies a shift from an idea of government as the mobilisation of the public sector that provides solutions for social problems, to an idea of governance as the capacity to enable the search of differentiated solutions through the mobilisation of a plurality of actors, not necessarily public.

It has been underlined that the change that is investing the public sphere at the end of the century is similar to the one that has interested the private sector starting from the '60s: the big monopolistic enterprise, to stand in the unstable markets of a more open competition, has been forced to face a deep process of reorganisation, defining the strategic functions that have been kept by the center and pushing out all what does not need o be done inside. All over the western world small and medium size firms are growing faster than big ones.

In Italy we know very well how the development of small and medium business can be vital for the economy and the territory and how they can evolve into "industrial districts" often much more efficient than the competing big enterprises.

In a similar way the great structures in the public sphere must rethink their mode of action: smaller and more numerous organisations are better than bigger and monopolistic ones (Savitch 1997); they are more agile, closer to citizens and services users, they are in a better position to answering effectively to the fragmentation and the constant evolution of social demands. Their development is a way of dealing with complexity from the point of view of the system.

Using this parallel between public and private process of restructuring come to the mind the words of Charles Lindblom: "we have experienced the market system in all its forms while we are only in our first steps in experiencing democracy" (Lindblom 1995).

It is actually a process already in course. In Italy the last decade has seen the rising of new subjects semi-public, private and of the third sector, to whom has been delegated or that have independently assumed the task of intervening and look after specific areas of public problems: from the assistance to populations with some form of disadvantage, to policies for supporting local development. Subjects whose mobilisation has already produced a redefinition of the ways in which public problems are defined and treated, a redefinition that is largely unconscious and interpreted only as a remedy to budgetary problems or to difficulties of the public administration.

3. The return to the community

In the last years there is a recurrent use of the notion of *community*. The same title of the congress underlines this.

As Patsy Healey has noticed this return of attention is shown in many different ways: "proposals are judged in terms of their impact on 'the community'. Projects are resisted as likely to threaten the exixting community. Communities in urban and rural areas are offered the opportunity to get involved in 'community development' activities of various kinds" (Healey 1997).

We can easily see that despite the very different meanings that are assigned to the term, this return of attention is the consequence of the processes that have been described in the previous paragraphs.

Let us try very briefly analyse some of these uses.

The notion of "community development" refers to a participatory process that is designed to deal with complex problems of urban peripheral areas. There is a large consensus about the fact that a process of regeneration, rehabilitation or development in a disadvantaged area (a) must be able to go beyond sectoral forms of intervention and (b) can be successful only if it is rooted in the mobilisation of local actors. All the programs like *Developpement social des quartiers* in France, "City Challenge" in Great Britain, "Community Empowerment Zones" in the United States, the "Contratti di Quartiere in Italy, show a very similar approach, built upon the disasters of the traditional ones. The European Union has largely taken inspiration from these programs to launch Urban Pilot Projects and the URBAN Initiative.

In general they all recognise that to get any kind of sectoral result it is necessary to pass through a very inter-sectoral community work.

The notion of Policy community has been introduced in Policy analysis by Richardson and Jordan (1983) as a reaction to the too strong metaphor of the "iron triangles" and to the too loose one of "issue network" proposed by Heclo at the beginning of the '70s. The idea is that public policies are administered and controlled by "community of actors" that are interested in a specific policy area, even if they are in completely different positions from the point of view of their formal role.

It is interesting to notice that the notion is frequently used in a normative way to indicate the need to build policy networks in order to deal with problems of political fragmentation. Strategic planning, for example, in a more or less open way assumes the objective of creating a policy community for urban policies.

In Italy there has been a debate about the concept of "local coalitions for development" that must be created to launch the Territorial Pacts, a form of negotiated development schemes that are reaching interesting results in the difficult field of development policies for southern part of the country. The proponents of these new instruments stress the idea that these local coalitions must try to build artificial "communities of actors" that can become the "immaterial infrastructure" for development (De Rita and Bonomi 1998).

Finally we refer to "community planning" to describe a particular way of building planning instruments in a participated way. Many experiences show how the involvement of local organisations and citizens is often the only way of solving local problems reinforcing at the same time a sense of identity that is an important resource in social and political terms.

Limiting my examples to these recurrent uses of the term community I intentionally avoid any reference to the neo-comunitarian thinking (Etzioni 1995) that could be seen as a new ideology that does not take fully into account the reality of contemporary complex societies.

But even limiting the attention to these uses we can see that all these ways of introducing the notion of community treat somehow the same problem: we cannot be effective in dealing with many urban problems if we do not try to thicken the webs of social relations either for taking together the various subjects that are active in specific

policy fields either for legitimising the mobilisation of public resources in a specific direction.

This reflects the fact that two different dimensions of social transformation can be seen as consequences of the globalisation process: on the one hand we have a plurality of actors involved in any kind of public action, on the other hand we have the problem of social fragmentation, the atomisation of social behaviours. The two dimensions are strictly intertwined but can be kept analitically separate.

What is left out from this narrow definition of urban governance is the attempt to deal with social fragmentation that draws public policies in all the possible directions until when they can loose any public content. The fact that social fragmentation produces the erosion of the public sphere is overlooked in this perspective (Donolo 1997).
If we recognise that the idea of urban governance cannot just be the devolution of public action, retreat from a direct engagement of the State, there must be something more than the mere management of the various actors that play actually a role in dealing with public problems.

In this sense the return of attention to the notion of community must not be seen as a nostalgic invocation of a past and lost condition, but as a way of caring about the maintenance of an area of common concern, of trying to cope with fragmentation through a process of collective sense-making that can legitimise public action.
Under this light participation is not only a way of avoiding paralising conflicts involving in the decision making process all the relevant actors, but also a strategy to cope with the disruptive consequences of social fragmentation for the public sphere.

In Consensus building approach we tend to underline that besides the direct results of the processes there are by-products that have been defined (Innes et al. 1994) as the production of an "intellectual, social and political capital". What I want to suggest here is that this kind of capital - that is made of common information, networks of relationship and alliances – must not be seen only as a by-product to be used in the best way, but as a very important step in the direction of a common recognition of a public sphere.

Viewed from this perspective the idea of community looses any natural character to become intentional, an image, a project, something to look for.

While the radical vision of urban governance does not recognise any place for an activity of orientation because fragmentation and devolution are seen as positive answers to increasing complexity, the notion of community opens toward the opposite direction in which an activity of orientation is even more important than in the past because it poses the pre-conditions for defining public problems.
In this sense planning can play a vital role as the way of socially constructing the sense and the content of the public sphere.

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